The Back Foot

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by spqr

Summary

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Notes

See the end of the work for notes

When Hannibal finds out that the hooker he's spent the last month romancing up and down the isle of Manhattan is also the author of the *NYT*'s monthly *Dark Minds* column, he reacts much the same way Will expects a normal man would react upon finding out his new girlfriend could deep throat.

That is to say: he abandons dinner entirely.

Considering the way his eyes darken whenever Will steals half his morning paper to circle all the human traffickers in the classifieds, maybe it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise, but Will still sort of feels like he has whiplash with how fast he goes from trying to retract his slip about that godawful *nom de plume* to lying flat out on the table, body spasming so hard as he comes down Hannibal's throat that he rattles all the polished cutlery they never got around to using.

Lights shine in the windows across the dark expanse of Central Park; Will breathes hard in the cool, still air of Hannibal's penthouse, Hannibal's saliva drying on his exposed cock, and says, "It's not even that good of a column."

"On the contrary." Hannibal pulls savagely at his own erection, arm braced next to Will's head. "I find it quite insightful."

"It's too heavily edited," Will argues. "They always make me cut the graphic stuff, but you can't exactly write a good profile of a serial murderer without describing the crime scene. All those gruesome details, that's how you figure out the killer's perspective."

Probably he should be helping Hannibal—after all, it's kind of his job—but he still can't feel most of his body, and also it's so scorchingly hot to just lay there and watch the motion of Hannibal's hand translate into these minute little twitches in his shoulder, watch his maroon-tinged eyes moving between Will's parted lips and his legs, splayed wide.

Will can see when he's close, and he grabs his sweaty hair and hauls him down into a biting kiss.

Hannibal's arm buckles. Will tastes blood—whose, he can't tell—and a split second later Hannibal comes with a ragged grunt, spilling artlessly all over Will's shirt and his own fingers.

Hannibal tries to push himself up off the table almost immediately, but Will wraps his arms and legs around him and to hold him in place, and he rumbles and acquiesces. He's heavy, solid—it's one of the things Will likes best about him: how virile he is, how primitive his body is under those tailored suits and expensive colognes, like something that came out of the cold shadows of a cave and disguised itself as human. Being underneath him is calming. It feels safe.

Will's under no delusions that theirs is going to be a long affair. He intends to enjoy Hannibal while he still has him.

After a minute, Hannibal tongues at his split lip and says, “I would be happy to hear the gruesome details.”

Well, Will thinks. At least he waited until after he came.

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In the morning, Will lets Hannibal’s driver take him as far as the nearest subway stop—he’ll take Hannibal’s money, but for some reason his conscience draws the line at free car rides—and skids into work just in time to get stuck with the bitch job: pushing Mrs. Komeda’s elderly shi-tzus around in their $600 twin baby carriage.

Before he started working at Prissy Paws, dogwalkers for Manhattan’s rich and famous, Will would’ve said he liked every dog he ever met; now he could only truthfully claim that he liked most of them. Mrs. Komeda’s shi-tzus are the sort of hateful beasts that were raised to think they were human children, fattened with prime rib and pampered with coat softener and generally afforded the sort of luxury that Will has only ever been able to glimpse in passing.

Granted, things have changed a little since Hannibal became a regular (at $2,000 a night, Will’s begun entertaining the fantasy of getting his heating fixed), but the shi-tzus still have more expensive jackets than he does.

Bev breaks into evil laughter when she spots him in the park. “Looking good, Graham! Is that daddy’s shirt?”

“Fuck off,” Will tells her, and plops down on the bench next to her.

Bev was with him when he met Hannibal at SATE, that new club downtown, and ever since she hasn’t stopped giving him shit about having a sugar daddy, never mind that Will’s a hooker and she knows it. He gets that it’s her backhanded way of trying to convince him to give up his life of sin and illegality—if he has a single long-term benefactor he won’t need to go out every weekend trawling for johns—but at this point it’s like she’s sticking her finger in an open wound.

“What’s got your panties in a twist?” She hands him her cup of coffee—lukewarm, half empty. “Is that *not* his shirt?”

It *is* Hannibal’s shirt—Will’s is currently covered in come and on its way to the cleaners, because Hannibal’s the sort of crazy person who prefers not to have his own washer and dryer—but he’s not about to give Bev the satisfaction.

“I’ve got another payment coming up on Monday,” he admits. “I’m still a few thousand short. Which means I’m back on the extreme ramen diet for the next few days.”

Bev makes an unhappy noise. “I don’t get why you don’t just ask Hannibal to pay the full amount—”

“You don’t just ask a guy for $500K, Bev, that’s not how it works.”

“He’d pay it, wouldn’t he?”

Will shakes his head, then amends, “Maybe. If he even has that kind of money.”

“The man has a penthouse with a view of the park, Will, he definitely has that kind of money.”

Will shakes his head without amendment. “It’s too much, Bev. It’s better to just get as much as I can out of him while he’s still got this weird fascination with me going on. Asking for half a mill would scare him off.”

Bev doesn’t look quite like she believes him, but she goes back to petting the mastiff curled up at her feet like an obedient dragon, and lets Will steer the conversation toward more inane topics, like her thesis and his column and Dr. Bloom’s new puppy Applesauce who everyone at work is dying to walk.

It’s not just that $500K is an insane thing to ask of someone—it’s also that the money’s not for a hospital bill, like Bev thinks it is. He paid off his plasmapheresis almost a year ago.

It’s for Will’s old therapist Dr. Frederick Chilton, who’s blackmailing him.

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“GRAHAM,” Jack Crawford booms across the bullpen, “MY OFFICE, NOW.”

Will can only assume this means there’s been a murder.

He tells the copy editor who’s gotten stuck with his column this month to do with the rest of it what she will—he’s here for his $750, not out of any sense of journalistic integrity—and goes to join Crawford in his office.

The other peons in the bullpen watch him go with a strange mix of envy and sympathy, which Will figures is about right given that most of them think he’s some sort of extreme breed of unpaid intern who only has to appear in person every three to four weeks. Crawford slams the door shut on their prying gazes and orders, “Sit.”

Will sits. “What is it?”

“No, I changed my mind. Get up, we’re going.”

Will gets up, and they go.

Thirty minutes later, secreted away in a smoky leather booth at the back of a restaurant that looks like it belongs in *The Godfather*, Crawford points a cigar at Will’s face and tells him, “The FBI is looking for you.”

Will’s stomach drops out through the floor. “What?”

“They started requesting advance copies of your column months ago. I refused, but someone in the newsroom has been slipping them to the local field office. They just saw your profile on the Central Park Ripper, and they’re suspicious of how good it is.”

Will's about a second from bolting. "*Suspicious?"*

"Not that they think you're the killer, but they're pretty sure you're someone inside their office leaking privileged information."

Will relaxes, but only a fraction. "What did you tell them?"

"Nothing," Crawford says. "I told those fuckers nothing. You're mine; they can't have you."

Well, Will supposes it's better than having the FBI knocking on his door. He figures it probably wouldn't take them too long to root out his night job, or the dead john he hacked into tiny pieces and threw in the Hudson—especially not if Chilton took the opportunity to merrily inform the press that Will confessed the whole sordid ordeal to him in the feverish throes of encephalitis. Having the editor-in-chief of the *NYT* holding his leash is hardly as bad as prison, most days.

"Maybe I shouldn't do any more Ripper stuff, for a while," he suggests.

Crawford stares at him like he's grown a second head. "Are you kidding? Ripper stuff is *all* you're doing."

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The next time Will's at Hannibal's penthouse, he finds a copy of the latest *NYT* on the pillow, open to the *Dark Minds* column. This month's is titled "Don't Be Rude to the Central Park Ripper," and above 1,000 words of some straightforward copy about the Ripper seeing his victims like pigs is that penname Will hates so much: Mr. Winston.

"It makes me sound like *I'm* the one leaving dismembered corpses in Central Park," he complains.

Hannibal, engaged over at the armoire with his dark ruby cufflinks, makes a soft noise of sympathy. "Perhaps you should allow them to use your real name, then. I'm sure it would open up more writing work for you."

A pause, brief enough that with anyone else Will would think it was unintentional—but Hannibal doesn't make unintentional pauses. "You might even be able to quit your escort job."

"Hooker," Will corrects.

"Escort," Hannibal returns courteously.

Will smiles slightly. It's an exchange they've had almost every time they've seen each other; Hannibal insists that Will is a much higher class of prostitute than he actually is, maybe to justify his own interest, maybe because of his total unwillingness to be disrespectful in any area of his life—even the bedroom, or the men's room at SATE.

"How would you like your *escort?"* Will asks, because he doesn't know how to address the other part.

“How would you like to be had?”

With any other client, Will would drum up some phony line like, *You’re the boss, daddy.* But with Hannibal, who seems to get off on giving him exactly what he wants—and on reading Will’s *column,* Jesus fuck—he doesn’t feel the need to play a part.

He kicks off his boots and knees his way onto the bed, putting his back to Hannibal. “Like this,” he says. “And choke me.”

Hannibal makes a wounded noise. “Are you quite sure, Will?”

“Quite fucking sure,” Will assures him. He’s hard in his jeans, just thinking about it. “Get naked.”

Hannibal shucks his shirt so fast he pops a button. Will smiles more than slightly.

It’s ridiculous—the thought clatters around in Will’s head even as Hannibal fucks into him from behind, Will’s back pressed flush to his sweaty chest, his hand wrapped firmly but carefully around Will’s throat—it’s ridiculous that Will gets paid for this. Gets paid for Hannibal breathing unevenly in his ear, Hannibal’s knees pressing his apart on the mattress, Hannibal’s hip bones bumping his red-bitten cheeks with every thrust, his free arm wrapped tight around Will’s stomach like he wants to pull him inside his body.

It’s ridiculous, because Will would do it for free. He would do it for free every day for the rest of his life.

“Hannibal,” he begs, and doesn’t even recognize the sound of his own voice. “Come on, I need you, need your hand—”

“You need no such thing,” Hannibal tells him. “You are perfectly capable of coming like this.”

Will’s arms are trapped against his body. He drops his head back against Hannibal’s shoulder and *keens*.

It’s fucking embarrassing is what it is, but no one else has ever fucked him like this. No one else has ever felt so good, john or drunken hookup or girlfriend with a strap-on or otherwise. Will feels like he could float here forever, Hannibal’s slick hands on his skin and his hot mouth on the hinge of Will’s jaw, tending the blazing fire in his ribcage with murmured endearments: *oh, my dear, dear Will.*

Hannibal’s thrusts become more ragged, less controlled, jostling Will’s hips forward so his aching erection pushes into empty air like some awful, mean prank. Will’s just about to start cursing him out and demanding his hand again when Hannibal’s grip on his throat tightens, so Will can’t swallow, so he can barely wheeze enough air into his lungs to stay conscious.

Will comes so hard he thinks it actually kills him, for a second.

When he blinks back around, minutes or hours later, he’s laying flat on his back, and Hannibal’s on his side next to him, regarding him with a faint crinkle around his eyes that

Will knows is actually insufferable smugness. “Told you,” Hannibal says.

“Bastard,” Will accuses. If it comes out fond, it’s only because he’s recently back from the dead. “Did you come?”

Hannibal opens his mouth, and Will can tell from the look on his face that he’s going to say something like *You need not worry yourself with such things,* which is code for *No* and also ridiculous, since he’s paying Will an exorbitant amount of money for sex when Will would gladly suck him off for a fiver or a penny or nothing at all.

So before he can say anything, Will sticks four fingers in his mouth. “Can I blow you?”

Hannibal bites him. That’s a *Yes*.

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It’s not until he’s back in his own shitty apartment, a fifth-floor walkup in East Harlem, that Will remembers thinking the words *for the rest of his life* while Hannibal was inside him.

“Fuck,” he tells his deadbolt, and then his empty refrigerator, and then his pillow. “Fuck, fuck, what the fuck.”

Will, from the age of seven, has pretty much resigned himself to dying alone. At nineteen, the longest relationship he’s ever had apart from his father was the roommate he had for a half a year when he first landed in the city—and the most he and Molly had ever talked to each other was when she left him a note on the fridge to please pick up milk on the way home.

He’s known Bev for almost that long, now, but still—none of the relationships he’s had have ever involved giving any significant part of himself over to someone else. With the murderous urges he has to push down at least ten times a day, not to mention the *actual murder* he now has in his past, it’s always been safer not to try. It’s never really bothered him before, being alone.

Now, all in a rush, he realizes that was necessity, not preference.

His apartment is freezing. It’s tiny. If he really puts his mind to it, he can stretch from the end of his bed and touch his toilet. He ran out of ramen yesterday and with his rationing he won’t have money to buy more until tomorrow. While he was blowing Hannibal he was thinking about protein, and now he’s face down in a twin bed he got for $20 from some guy on Craigslist and he has to be up in an hour to go to a job that pays $70 a day and tonight he’ll have to go back to SATE because Hannibal’s busy and he’s still $500 short.

Will doesn’t want to be here. He wants to be back in Hannibal’s penthouse, and not just because it’s a penthouse. Not just because of the silk sheets and the view and the fully-stocked pantry.

He thinks the next time Hannibal asks, *Tell me something*, like he sometimes does in the small hours of the morning, when neither of them can get back to sleep, he might say, *I chopped a man into nineteen pieces and threw him in the river*.

Part of him can't shake the belief that Hannibal would understand.

But that's crazy. Will can never tell him. Hannibal's practice is one of the most respected in the city, on the whole East Coast; it makes sense that he would like a hooker with a keen eye for psychology.

A hooker with a keen eye for murder is another thing entirely.

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In the end, he doesn't have to go back to SATE, because Mrs. Komeda with the awful shi-tzus invites him to her dinner party.

Will figures he's likely to find much richer johns at a high society event than in the red-lit backrooms of a downtown club, so he lets himself be shanghaied into wearing one of Mrs. Komeda's dead husband's tuxes and does a dutiful turn on the baby grand before grabbing a strong drink and escaping to the kitchen.

Rooms packed with large numbers of people have always made Will uncomfortable, but after half a decade living in New York he's learned to deal—mostly by anesthetizing himself with jack.

And with this many guests, it means he has his pick of potential clients.

They're not hard to spot: the closeted gay man standing stiffly by his wife's side and trying to look proud and in love as partygoers congratulate them on twenty years of marriage; the cougar clinging desperately to her sixties with bleached hair and too much lipstick who keeps looking at Will's ass every time he turns around; the Wall Street type with the trim beard who holds his nubile date's elbow too tightly and looks like he compensates for his developing beer gut by fucking rough and fucking mean.

The trick is figuring out which one of them will shell out $500 for a quickie in one of Mrs. Komeda's guest rooms. Will's hoping it's not Wall Street, but it's not looking good. The closeted guy's wife is wearing a dress that's had the seam taken in; if it had been let out, Will might think she just liked the dress, but no woman loses weight and doesn't want to buy new clothes to show off. And the cougar's jewelry is all fake. Will can smell the cubic zirconium from here.

Wearily, he turns his eyes to Wall Street. At least, he figures, he'll be saving the guy's date a beating.

Halfway across the crowded drawing room, he hears someone say, "Will?"

He recognizes that strange Lithuanian accent. All the tension goes out of him, and he says, "Hannibal."

Then he turns, and Hannibal's not alone. There's a woman with him, statuesque and blonde, so at ease in her designer wardrobe that Will can only assume she's some sort of minor royalty. He goes tense again.

“What a lovely surprise,” Hannibal says, and his voice is warm enough, but there’s no trace of any secret intimacy in it. “This is Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier. Bedelia, my dear friend Will.”

Bedelia raises a single eyebrow. “No last name?”

A flicker of uncertainty crosses over Hannibal’s face. “Forgive me. I’m afraid I don’t know it.”

“Graham,” Will supplies. “Will Graham,” and shakes Bedelia’s hand.

He realizes as she takes her hand back that he just told a client his last name—something he never, ever lets himself do—and then wonders when he stopped thinking of Hannibal as just another john. Probably, if he’s being honest with himself, it was the first time Hannibal came inside him, or a few minutes after, when he soothed the flat of his tongue to the bite mark in Will’s shoulder and said, *You have my sincere apologies. I have never tasted something so exquisite.*

“How do you know Hannibal, Mr. Graham?” Bedelia inquires.

It’s a polite question, but there’s something sharp in her gaze, like she’s already privvy to the exact details of how they know each other, and *when* they’ve known each other, and where. It raises Will’s hackles, but he doesn’t have the time to get in a territorial pissing contest, not if Hannibal’s not going to take him home tonight—and from the looks of things, he isn’t.

Will’s not sure why the idea hurts so much. He’s not sure why he even thought Hannibal would be exclusive in the first place. No matter how big a fan of *Dark Minds* Hannibal is, Will’s still just a hooker.

“He bit me,” he tells Bedelia, maybe a little bit spiteful. “Excuse me, I have to say hello to someone.”

Wall Street says he’ll pay $400 to fuck Will without lube, and an extra $100 if Will calls him *master* while he does it.

If Chilton doesn’t have his semi-monthly $10K by nine a.m. tomorrow, the blackmail packet containing Will’s recorded sessions and his psych profile goes straight to the *National Tattler* and Freddie Lounds. Will meets Hannibal’s maroon-tinged eyes across the room, just for a second, and rips his gaze away before he can do something stupid, like cry.

“Deal,” he tells Wall Street. “Just as long as you pay up front, and pay in cash.”

His client’s not interested in Mrs. Komeda’s guest room. Will feels Hannibal’s eyes on him as they leave.

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“I can’t tonight,” Will tells Hannibal, when he calls the next day. “I’m sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize,” Hannibal assures him. *“If it’s not too much to ask—Is everything alright?”*

Will snorts a laugh, and doesn't answer.

He's wanted to kill his johns before, plenty of times. He has long, meandering narratives in his head of how he'd do it, adapted specially for each of them, flayings and decapitations and castrations. He's only ever acted on his impulses once, with Garrett Jacob Hobbs, who'd wanted his daughter to watch and wanted Will to lay on a bed of antlers, who'd kept a crossbow loaded on the nightstand and thought for some reason that Will would just go along with it, just let himself be killed.

He nearly did it again last night, with Wall Street. If he could've done it, he'd have gutted him. He would've liked to watch him try to stuff his own intestines back in his body as he bled out, slowly. But there were too many people who knew him who'd seen them together—Hannibal, Mrs. Komeda, Bedelia Du Maurier. He would have to go back later.

"Will?" Hannibal prompts, when he's been silent for too long. *"I did not mean to pry—"*

"I'm still bleeding," Will admits. "I can't—if I had sex tonight, I think it would do some permanent damage."

Hannibal makes a hurt sound. *"Oh, my dear. Would you permit me to take care of you?"*

"I," Will says. "What?"

"The thought of you alone and in pain is unconscionable to me."

Will stares at the waterstain on his ceiling, confused. "I could blow you, I guess? But I'm serious about the damage."

"I require nothing of you. I only wish to make sure you have everything that you need."

Mortifyingly, Will feels tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. He knows he should tell Hannibal *No*, maintain some sort of boundary between business and personal, like he's been trying to do making Hannibal's driver drop him at the train. But getting out of bed this morning to bring Chilton his money already took all of Will's energy, and he's starving, and it's cold, and he knows he should shower but his legs shake if he stands long enough to pee.

"I'm fine," he tells Hannibal, even though he wants nothing more than to have the man come over here and take care of everything, hold him while he falls into the deep sleep of the emotionally and physically battered. "I'll be okay."

"You are not fine." Hannibal's voice is gentler than it's ever been. *"Please, let me pick you up. I will pay your normal rate."*

Laughter bubbles up in Will's mouth. "You want to *pay* to take care of me?" The idea is absurd, but then—as evidenced by last night—Will has done a lot worse things for money. "What the hell," he says. "Sure, Hannibal. Come get me."

Thirty minutes later, Will gets a text that just says *I am here* and somehow manages to walk himself down five flights of stairs to the Bentley waiting out front. It's snowing, and so cold

that Will swears the second the air hits his face, but he only has a second to be grumpy about it before he's inside the warm car, being handed a steaming travel mug of...

"Is this tea?" he asks Hannibal skeptically.

"Ginseng," Hannibal says. "It has restorative properties."

He pulls away from the curb, smooth as can be, and merges into traffic.

Will takes a sip of ginseng tea, sinking into the Bentley's heated seat. "Hannibal?"

Hannibal glances at him. "Yes, Will?"

"Did you sleep with that woman last night?"

Hannibal keeps his eyes on the road, and Will can't tell if he's angry. He'd have every right to be, objectively. Will's not someone who has the right to demand answers about his sex life—they're not in a *relationship*. Hannibal pays him for sex, and even though for some strange reason he seems intent on making sure Will doesn't bleed out, it's not as if they're going steady or something.

After all, the man's driving gloves cost more than Will's monthly food budget. A lot more. They're not compatible in the long term, no matter how much it feels like they understand each other when they're fucking.

"Dr. Du Maurier is my therapist," Hannibal says, at last. "Though we maintain a friendly acquaintance outside of our doctor-patient relationship, we have never been intimate in that way. It would be highly inappropriate."

"Oh," Will says, feeling oddly warmed.

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Will knows that it was his body that drew Hannibal to him, that first night at SATE. Bev once told him that he looks "kind of like if Leonardo da Vinci had a vision of a Sweet Home Alabama twink," which Will thinks was a supposed to be a compliment even if he doesn't really understand what it means. What he does understand is that he's got slim hips and the dusky kind of chest hair that doesn't look like chest hair at all and a mouth that people call "pouty" and tell him they want to fuck.

Part of him is expecting Hannibal to be put off permanently by the line of dark bruises that Wall Street left on his sides and his thighs—a lot of men only like to see you marked if they're the ones who marked you—but he only makes a soft noise of sympathy as he helps Will undress for the shower, hands gentle on Will's skittish skin.

Will stands under the heated spray, listing against the wall, and watches Hannibal undress through the warped glass of the shower door. He's already only in a sweater and slacks—much more casual than Will is used to seeing him—but the process is no less elaborate for it. Will likes watching him undress, the ceremony of it all. It's like he's deconstructing himself.

In the shower, Hannibal lets Will lean against his chest. Will always feels like he internalizes the winter, like he spends the long dark months forgetting what it's like to be warm, forgetting that he *wants* to be warm, but Hannibal's body is like a furnace, and the water pattering against his back is hot enough it's probably turning his skin bright red.

Hannibal sinks his hand in Will's wet curls and presses a kiss to his temple. There's something proprietary in how he does it, something primitive that calms Will immediately.

"You should be naked all the time," he tells Hannibal, without thinking.

Hannibal chuckles lightly. "I fear some of my patients would object—though not all."

Will only hums. He feels like he's in some sort of twilight zone. Last night, a sadist was paying to use him as a glorified masturbatory object, and now a man he thinks things like "for the rest of our lives" about is paying to hold him in the shower.

"Tell me something," Hannibal says, over the top of Will's head.

Will lets himself be lulled by the steady thump of the heart under his forehead. "I dream about you."

Hannibal's grip on him tightens infinitesimally. "I dream about you, as well."

"I dream about you when I'm awake."

Hannibal pulls away from him, but only far enough to look at Will's face. His gaze is raw, as if he's been stripped of something—some protective layer. He thumbs at Will's lower lip. "Dear Will. May I—"

"Yeah. Yes, Hannibal."

Before he can act on his permission, Will pulls him down and kisses him.

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"Are You the Ripper's Next Meal?" the next *Dark Minds* column asks, two weeks later.

Crawford goes into nearly orgasmic conniptions when Will comes back from the latest crime scene with the theory that the Central Park Ripper isn't just taking organs as surgical trophies—he's eating them. As a result he wants 2,000 words, not 1,000, and he pays Will $1,500 bucks, which means Will finally has enough in his monthly budget to get his heating fixed.

"You sound almost as if you admire the man," Hannibal comments, perusing Will's column over breakfast.

Will's sort of preoccupied. He's still thinking about Crawford handing him a burner phone and telling him that the FBI tapped the *NYT*'s phones, so he's not really aware of what's coming out of his mouth until he's said, "I do admire him."

He hears it a second later, and says, “Shit, no. I mean—he’s a serial killer. A cannibal. Of course I don’t admire him.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “There’s no need to put on airs with me, Will. It’s perfectly natural to admire that which we fear.”

“I don’t *fear* him.” Will pushes his homemade sausage around his plate. The sun is shining over the park; he’s going to be late for work again, but he’s so distracted he doesn’t think he’ll mind taking Mrs. Komeda’s shi-tzus, today. “Maybe I should. Maybe that would be healthier. But he’s not the same as the other killers I’ve profiled.”

The energy in the room shifts. “In what way?”

Will feels like he’s stumbled into some sort of relationship test, like when his brief high school girlfriends used to ask him if he liked what they did with their hair. He swallows. “Most serial murderers, serial rapists, they’re driven to commit their crimes by factors in their past. They're socialized to it, whether it’s because of neglectful parents or abuse or some sort of sexual deficiency—I don’t have to tell you this, I’m sure you already know it.”

Hannibal inclines his head. “I’m familiar with criminal psychology, yes.”

“Then you’ll know how rare it is for a killer to be *born*, not made. For something to be wrong inside him, right from the get-go. That’s not to say that there aren’t other factors, just that they don’t matter. Life didn’t shape him. He came out fully-formed.”

“Doesn’t that make him even more alien to you?” Hannibal asks. “More terrifying?”

Will shakes his head.

Fire dances behind Hannibal’s eyes. “Why not?”

If Will were to answer that truthfully, he’d have to say *Because I’m the same way.* I was born wrong. I feel as much for the killers I profile as I do for their victims, and instead of calling 911 after I killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs I made his daughter help me cut him into pieces because I was afraid the police would see how much I’d enjoyed shooting him.

“I don’t know,” he says, instead. “I don’t know why, I just—I feel like I know him.”

“Perhaps you do,” Hannibal muses. “After all, one meets many interesting people in your line of work.”

And spears a link of sausage.

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Will finally gets to walk Applesauce on one of the first mild days of the year, which feels like kismet in its own right even before he’s on his way out and finds Dr. Bloom trying to gather up a bunch of papers on the front steps before the wind can get them.

She smiles gratefully as he crouches to help her. “Thanks. Seriously, I’ve had the day from hell.”

“Well, I just put your dog back, so hopefully she can cheer you up.”

“You work for Prissy Paws?” Dr. Bloom catches a redlined copy of Will’s latest *Dark Minds* column as it tries to escape into the street. “How was she? I hope she wasn’t too much trouble.”

“She was very well behaved,” Will assures her. It comes out kind of distracted, because he’s holding a document addressed to the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit that’s entitled PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF NYT COLUMNIST MR. WINSTON, but he manages to shake it off and hand the paper back to her with a smile. “You work for the FBI?”

“Yes.” Dr. Bloom takes the paper a little quicker than before. “I’m a consultant. I’m sorry, this is embarrassing, but would you mind coming up and signing an NDA?”

Will sort of wants to laugh. “Yeah, sure. No problem.”

He takes a few seconds to glance at the FBI’s profile of him while Dr. Bloom goes hunting for a copy of the Bureau’s standard NDA, Applesauce jumping excitedly at her heels. It’s mostly wrong—it claims he’ll have an advanced degree in psychology or criminology, that he might have a career in law enforcement, that he likely felt unappreciated in his daily life and was driven to find praise and validation elsewhere. It also says he might be a killer himself.

That’s all he manages to see before he hears Applesauce’s claws scrabbling in the hardwood hallway. He flips the file closed and slips his hand casually into his pocket as Dr. Bloom comes back into the room, smiling and apologizing for taking so long.

“No problem,” Will says again, like she didn’t just do him a huge fucking favor.

They’re nowhere near finding him, is the main thing.

Unless Chilton gets tired of his $20k a month and decides he’d rather write some sort of tell-all book about treating Mr. Winston, the twisted empath with the superpowered mirror neurons, they’re never going to come to the conclusion that he’s a nineteen-year-old dog walker who moonlights as a hooker and never officially graduated high school.

The only danger is that they’ll cotton on to Crawford giving him burners like he’s fucking Deep Throat.

What all of this means is that the next time Wall Street contacts him (a brusque text with a location, a time, and an amount), Will feels perfectly comfortable showing up with a linoleum knife.

As it turns out, Wall Street carries a switchblade, and he even sort of knows how to use it, so Will only gets to listen to him gurgle instead of actually *watch* him try to stuff his guts back in because he’s too busy hanging his face over the bathtub and trying to stop the bleeding with handfuls of toilet paper.

It's no use—the toilet paper keeps sticking to his fingers and the gash in his cheek—so he goes back out into the room, blood running freely down his chin and his neck, gets behind Wall Street where he's slumped against the foot of the bed, and slits his throat. The man jerks once, twice, and then goes quiet and still, settling into his well-deserved end.

Will calls down to the concierge, tells them he's cut himself shaving, and asks them to leave some band-aids at the door since he's about to hop in the shower. They call him by Wall Street's name, Mr. Brown, which is good because when the police come asking questions later they'll remember that he was still alive shortly after one a.m, which he definitely isn't.

Check-out isn't until eleven, and Will has all the necessary accoutrements to make sure Mr. Brown is gone by then.

Once the last of the acid is drained from the tub, Will gets the linens from the bed soaking in a strong bleach and sets to work on the carpet. He doesn't have to get every trace of blood—just enough that, when they cleaners come in to turn over the room, they don't notice anything out of the ordinary. Mr. Brown was the sort of person who kept crank in a vial around his neck and made hookers call him *master;* he doesn't expect anyone at work will report him missing.

Will uses the automatic check-out on the TV at 10:30 and leaves the place smelling like roses.

***

When he gets back to his building a little before noon, there are approximately nine million reporters clogging the street.

He recognizes Freddie Lounds's bright red head, and Brian Zeller and Jimmy Price from the *NYT* crime desk, trying to herd Crawford away from where he seems to be getting into it with men in FBI windbreakers, and thank God he cleaned his glasses while he was scrubbing the mirror in the hotel, because he spots them from a good two blocks away.

"Fuck," he says, turns on his heel, and goes back down into the subway.

On the train downtown there are so many copies of the *Tattler* with a photo of him at the latest Ripper crime scene two days ago under the words MR. WINSTON UNMASKED that he's suddenly grateful for the huge square of gauze taped to his face and the troupe of twelve-year-old breakdancers drawing everyone's annoyance in the aisle.

By the time he gets off a block from Hannibal's building, he has four missed calls from Frederick Chilton on one phone, seven from Jack Crawford on the other, and one from Bev that he actually listens to where she just says, "Holy fuck, dude!"over and over and then offers her apartment in Brooklyn as a safe haven.

It's good of her, but there's only one place Will really wants to go.

Then he spots Alana Bloom coming out of the elevator in Hannibal's lobby, and has to duck back outside to hide in an alley and hyperventilate with his hands on his knees.

Somewhere between puking behind a dumpster, accepting a stick of mint gum from a friendly smoker, and collapsing on his ass in a pile of soggy trash, Will manages to take out his phone and dial Hannibal.

It rings for almost too long, but then Hannibal picks up and says, *"Will. Where are you?"*

"Did you sell me out to the FBI?" Will demands, and then, "Shit, are they—Are they running a trace on this?"

"Of course not," Hannibal tries to mollify him. "*Please, just tell me—"*

Will hangs up.

His phone starts ringing again almost immediately. He stares at the caller ID: *Daddy*, courtesy of Bev. He lets it ring out, knocking his head back against the brick and calling himself stupid over and over again.

He's going to have to run. Not to Bev's, not to Brooklyn. He's going to have to make the $500 he got off Mr. Brown last night go a long, long way—until he's far away from the FBI manhunt for him to start picking up other johns, at least. He can buy a bus ticket, something to another big city, probably somewhere in the south where he can let his accent out and shave his head and disappear in the thousands of other trailer park kids who grew up to be dock workers.

Tears burn in his eyes, blurring his vision, and Will knows that he's not on the brink of a breakdown about his shitty apartment or his dog walking job or the cheap art print Bev brought over last weekend to "liven up the place," the first gift he can remember someone giving him since childhood. None of that matters, in the grand scheme of things.

What matters is that three days ago he spent the night wide awake in Hannibal's bed, watching the soft lines of his face in sleep, Hannibal's arm heavy across his stomach, and he had no idea it was going to be the last time.

He pushes his glasses up onto his head to grind his knuckles into his eyes, and calls Hannibal back.

"Will," Hannibal answers, before the first ring is even over. "*You must know that I would never betray you to anyone. I would pay a much bloodier tax than money to keep you by my side."*

Will chokes on his gum, then manages, "I'm coming upstairs."

His leg jitters the whole way up to Hannibal's penthouse. He'd come over here meaning to confess maybe 40% of the truth, about *Dark Minds* and the FBI and not wanting to go to jail for solicitation, but the more he thinks about it he realizes that there's no point in doing this halfway. Just like there's no point in escaping to New Orleans or Tallahassee if it means leaving this strange man who he feels impossibly, inexplicably connected to behind. It would be like living half a life.

So when the doors of the elevator slide open to reveal Hannibal, standing at the end of the hall in one of his ridiculous three-piece suits, every inch of him perfectly composed, Will says, “I think we’re going to have to do this naked.”

The power balance is all off, with him clothed like that. He’s armored, and Will’s still shaking like a leaf.

Hannibal blinks at him. “What on earth happened to your face?”

Will leaves his shoes just inside the elevator, his jacket in the front hall, and is setting to work on his belt by the time he reaches the plush carpet at the other end. “I’m going to tell you every bad thing I’ve ever done,” he tells Hannibal, watching the way his maroon-tinged eyes darken with lust. “But only once you take your pants off, and not a second before.”

Hannibal’s gaze turns fond. “I have never met someone who keeps me so constantly on the back foot.”

“Don’t talk,” Will snaps. It’s rude, but he’s not in any kind of mood for romantic declarations. “Just—shut up and strip.”

“Happily,” Hannibal assents, and begins the ceremony.

***

Once they’ve opened the first aid kit and established a field hospital in the master bedroom, Hannibal says, “I am sure the FBI would be willing to forgive the illegality of your profession, if you were to come forward and assist them with their Ripper profile.” He’s sewing up Will’s face, braced over him on his elbows, calm and capable.

“I know.” Will watches his eyes. “I’m just not sure they’d excuse the murders.”

Hannibal’s hands freeze for a moment, suture wire tugging at Will’s skin. Then he composes himself and continues the row of stitches. “What murders?” he asks, with forced casualness.

“Matthew Brown, last night.” Will hooks his fingers lightly around Hannibal’s wrist. “And Garrett Jacob Hobbs, a year ago.”

“Matthew Brown,” Hannibal repeats, thoughtfully. “He was the man from Mrs. Komeda’s dinner party, was he not? The one who took you home and left you with those despicable injuries.” On anyone else, the word *despicable* might sound trite, but when Hannibal says it it carries a depth of raw fury that makes Will feel like he’s in bed with a guard dog.

And yet, Hannibal’s hands are still gentle. “I think he will not be greatly missed.”

“Well, he certainly won’t be *found*,” Will agrees.

Hannibal finishes the stitches, snips the suture, and brushes his lips in a gentle kiss just under Will’s eye. “I trust you were very thorough, my dear. Perhaps you were not so conscientious with your first hunt?”

“Hunt,” Will echoes slowly, holding Hannibal’s gaze. He feels like he *sees* him, then, even if he doesn’t understand what it is he’s seeing. “No. I was careful. But I told someone in confidence, and they’ve been using it to extort money out of me.”

“I take it that was how you came to be an escort?” Hannibal asks, and when Will doesn’t correct him with “hooker” but only nods, inquires even more gently, “How much money has this person demanded?”

“Half a million.” Will’s voice is small, between them. “Ten thousand, twice a month.”

Hannibal frowns. “May I ask who this person is?”

“Yeah.” Will drops his head back against the pillow, eyes closed. “My old shrink. Frederick Chilton.”

The hand on Will’s hip tightens. Hannibal drops his head to mouth at the skin of his stomach, and Will sucks in a breath as he moves lower, nosing at the thin line of hair below his navel. “Hannibal.”

When he opens his eyes, Hannibal is watching him, waiting patiently for permission to continue. Will flounders for a moment, his hand on the top of Hannibal’s head, unsure what he’d meant to say when he started.

“I never really wanted to take your money,” is what he comes up with, at last.

It sounds sort of pathetic, in light of everything he’s just confessed, but the lines of Hannibal’s face soften. He presses a kiss to Will’s navel, and his abdomen, his sternum, working his way up until he can claim Will’s mouth, eminently careful of the wound on his cheek. “Everything I have is yours,” he murmurs, against Will’s lips. “*Oh,* my dear. Money is the very least of it.”

Will wraps him up in all his limbs, his arms around Hannibal’s shoulders and his legs around his waist, drunk with the feeling of his weight over top of him, like finding safe harbor after a stormy night at sea. He tries to kiss Will’s neck, heading back down to his cock, but Will pulls on his hair and says, “Stay here.”

“Anything,” Hannibal acquiesces. “Anything, Will.”

Will fumbles for his hand and draws it down between them. Hannibal gets with the program with speed and precision that betrays how in tune he is with Will’s each and every need, fisting Will’s erection so tightly that it’s almost painful, exactly how Will likes. Precome squelches between his fingers, the sound of it so totally obscene that Will’s vision whites out with pleasure.

The noise that comes out of his throat is totally involuntary, and he gets the sense that Hannibal’s answering growl is the same. He bites Hannibal’s chin and reaches between them for the thick rod of his cock, body-hot and heavy with blood in Will’s hand, and squeezes, wanting to feel Hannibal jerk against him like bodies jerk when they’re dying.

They breathe hard against each other, ribcages battering like the ocean crashing against rocks, and when Will comes he does it shouting Hannibal's name, biting a curse and biting down on his own lip, totally fucking transported.

Hannibal follows him off the cliff a second later, with a sound like a sob.

***

Dawn breaks over Central Park, and Will wakes to an empty bed and news of another Ripper victim.

He can see the flashing lights from Hannibal's bedroom window, police and FBI and reporters clustered in a circus near the center of the park, and he absently flicks on the TV on his way into the bathroom, so he can listen to the usual useless reportage: unidentified victim, male, white, forties, discovered early this morning by joggers, yadda yadda yadda.

They won't release the details of the tableau until the victim's family has been notified, and Will's in no mood to be snuck into a crime scene by Crawford, so when he answers the phone, toothbrush in his mouth, he just says, "No."

"I can keep the feds off your back." Crawford sounds sort of desperate, like maybe he hasn't slept in a few days.

"No you can't," Will returns, bending to spit. But he can't help a small tingle of curiosity. He wanders back out into the room to sit on the edge of the bed and watch footage of the crime scene from like a fucking mile away, and asks, "Do they have an ID?"

"*Yeah,"* Crawford says. *"They didn't release it, but the girl who writes our society page recognized him. Frederick Chilton."*

A lot of things suddenly make a lot of sense.

"I've got to go," he tells Crawford. "Actually, I quit."

Crawford booms, *"GRAHAM—"*

"Get Zeller to do my column," Will says. "He's not so bad."

Crawford's screaming bloody murder on the other end of the line, threatening Will's manhood and his future children and his good name, but Will just hangs up and throws the burner back on the bed. He's smiling, he realizes. Really smiling, in that completely helpless way he can't really remember doing since he was a kid, whenever he caught a fish or his dad brought home a new dog.

He goes out into the apartment. Something's sizzling in the kitchen—sausage, it smells like. Classical music drifts quietly down the hall, and when Will walks past the dining room table, he sees a manila folder on it marked "Will Graham" in Chilton's handwriting.

This must be what love feels like, he thinks, leaning in the door to the kitchen, watching the strong lines of Hannibal's back as he works over the stove. He's in his pajamas—he must

have changed out of whatever clothes he put on to go out hunting, must have come home to Will in the dead of night and moved quietly through the apartment, not wanting to wake him, washing blood off himself and disposing of evidence, only to come in here and make him breakfast, to feed him, to take care of him.

“So,” he says, by way of greeting. “What part of Frederick Chilton are we eating?”

Hannibal turns to smile at him, radiant. “Will. I didn’t expect you so early. Did you sleep well?”

“I slept great.” Will slips his arms around Hannibal’s waist, presses his face to the back of his shoulder. “You wore me out.”

He can feel Hannibal preening under his hands, the muscles in his torso shifting ever-so-slightly as he tilts a beautiful omelet out of the pan and onto a plate. “I hope that means you’re hungry,” he says.

Will smiles against his shoulder, happier than he’s ever been. “Starving.”

End Notes

honestly??? this started out as a sex and the city au

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